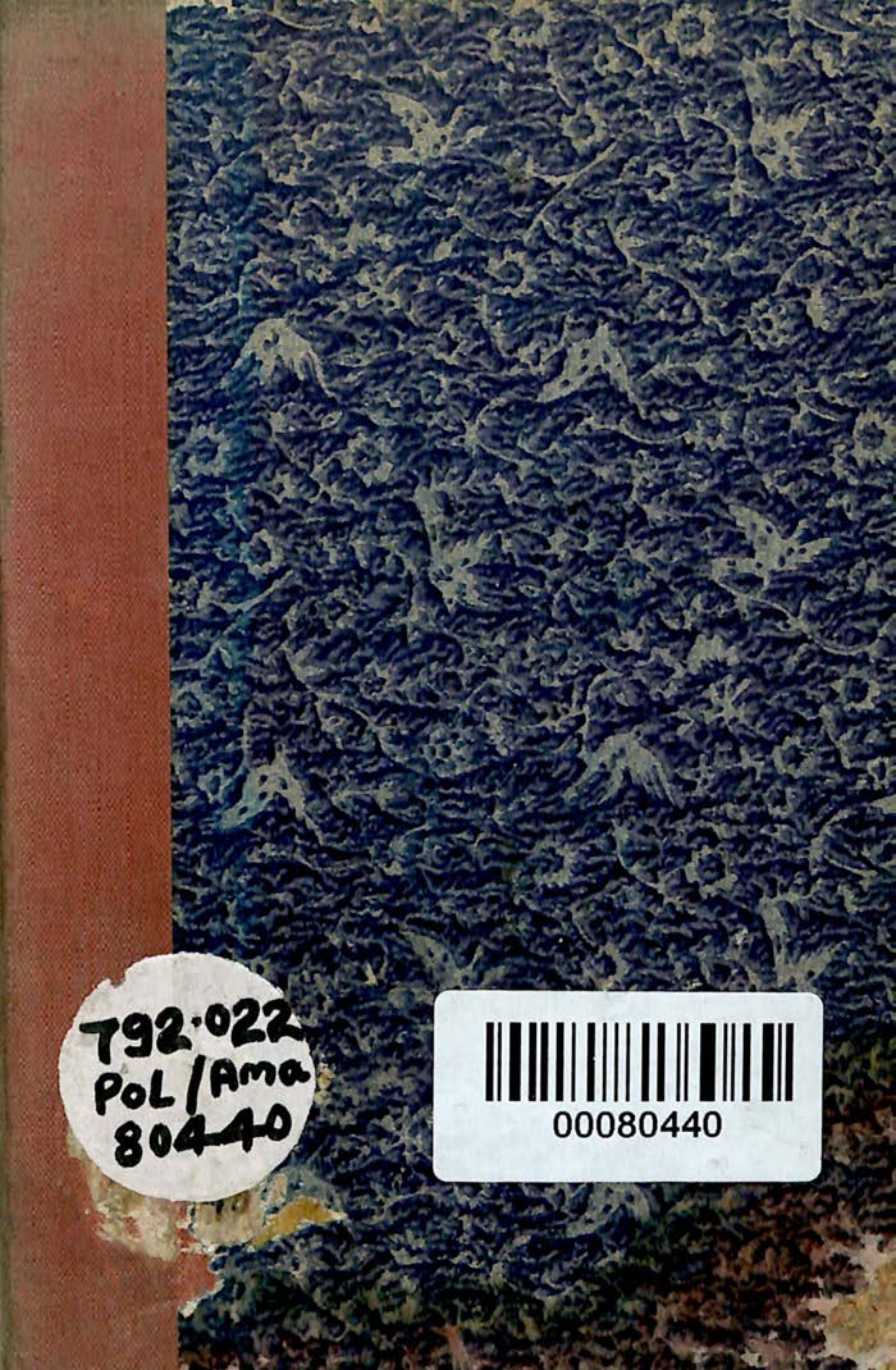
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AMATEUR THEATRICALS.

COMEDY. *Front.*

Drawn by Kate Greenaway.

AMATEUR THEATRICALS.

80440

BY

WALTER HERRIES POLLOCK

AND

LADY POLLOCK.

R-e-13

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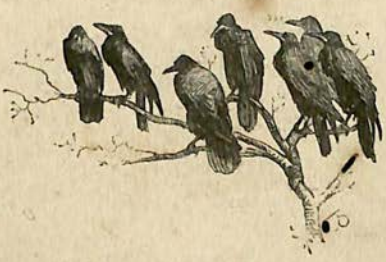


AMATEUR THEATRICALS.

AMATEUR THEATRICALS.

CHAPTER I.

AMATEURS AND THEIR WORK.

THERE is perhaps no form of amusement more generally popular at the present day than that of private theatricals, and although at first sight it may appear strange that people should take great delight in seeing their friends play at acting, when with less trouble they could see the real thing done by trained actors, it is actually not difficult to find an explanation for the enjoyment which attaches to these performances. To begin with, in the case of juvenile representations, there is the attraction of the animation and bustle which attend the return of the boys from school, when they are informed

by their sisters that they are going to get up a play, and they find the learning of a part their only pleasant holiday task.

Their parents join in the pastime, and without them indeed it could hardly go well: the drilling and arranging are occasionally tiresome, but the weight of it falls on the elders, and then the dressing and the acting, the being somebody else, and yet enough yourself to know it, is enchanting; everybody's talents are called into play and everybody is sympathetic; the preparations for the performance, if they give trouble, afford continual interest, and when the final representation comes the audience is a kind one and in the case of a few hitches and blunders only makes merry with them and is prepared to wonder that on the whole there is so much success.

The parents are congratulated, the children are elated and the supper is a feast; only perhaps a few of the spectators make some severe remarks, such as, "This talent is dangerous," "Are you not afraid your boy will go on the stage?" or, "Is it not too exciting?" or, "Doesn't it make them vain?" but the more general feeling is one of indulgent satisfaction, and people say, "What an excellent diversion; how it must improve their memory, and teach them to speak up and help them to have good manners; and how agreeable all to be united

in the same pursuit!"—and so it is; and this is one of the charms of all amateur acting, not less among grown-up people than children: it promotes sympathy, it is a pursuit in which you must be mutually interested, for if you do not play into each other's hands the whole affair is inevitably a failure; and as for the audiences, what funds of forbearance, indulgence, and patience, are drawn upon, in their case, and how generously they are wont to reply to the call! It is generally understood that they are to be blind and deaf to errors, and to have piercing perceptions for every approach to excellence.

Taken in this way the diversion seems perfect; the dialogue of the play will in most cases be more interesting than ordinary conversation, it will have more point and more meaning, and if the piece is not too long the spectators will so far be really gainers. They are perhaps almost as much amused to see their friends assuming new characters, as those friends themselves are delighted to get out of their own identity, and cheat themselves into the idea of a fresh existence if only for an hour or two, an idea which grows out of a change of costume and speeches got by rote in most cases, for it is only a small number of people who have that gift of personation which is an actual casting away of their own thoughts, habits, and characteristics to enter completely into another individuality.

This metempsychosis may be called in its lowest phase the mimic art, and in its highest the dramatic inspiration, or as the French call it the *feu sacré*, an expression which signifies the passionate instinct without which poetical acting cannot exist; a very rare endowment: it is that fine excess of emotional sensibility which is indispensable to a poetical actor, and which when it is developed in a higher degree makes the essence of a poet.

But there is a great deal of agreeable acting which has nothing to do with poets and poetry, and this in all nations is the most abundant. The gifts which excite merriment are far more common than those which draw tears, and those are most numerous which do it in the most obvious way. Farce, which is the commonest form of humour, never fails to find meritorious representatives, but that delicate comedy which deals rather in wit than in absurdity is almost as difficult to play as high tragedy, and it demands in the actor many if not all of the same endowments. Depending more upon dialogue and character than situation, it exacts careful articulation, studied modulation of tones, significance of expression without over marking, and all that scientific training of the voice which makes it pleasant to listen to. It also demands grace of demeanour, vivacity without restlessness,

and a general knowledge of the habits of good society. These are considerable requirements.

Take the *School for Scandal* as one of the best known and most frequently performed English comedies of this class: a well trained company who have worked and studied long together is required to give even a tolerable representation of such a piece, and it is therefore distinctly unsuited to such amateur performances as are got up on the sudden, hurried through with hardly more than a dozen rehearsals, by ladies and gentlemen who have rarely if ever, worked together, and who have often never worked at all. To many of them it may be new even to learn words or to stand still, which indeed is no easy art with the consciousness of standing to be looked at. Perhaps too they cannot afford to be long about a play; their social conditions will not admit of it; as the exigencies of preparation upset every other kind of pursuit while this is going on. On this account it is common to hear drawing-room actors say that rehearsing, working, and studying, destroy spontaneity; it may be very convenient to suppose so, but it is very untrue. The fact is that the effect of spontaneity can only be given to written dialogue by constant study in concert. The speakers must know not only their own words, but those of their interlocutors, and must be prepared for their every

pause, look, gesture, and movement, otherwise they may cut in too soon or wait too long, or forget the business of the scene in a too natural surprise; it is really no less necessary for the performers to practise together for the production of a drama, than for the musicians who play concerted music.

The hurry which is almost a necessary condition of most amateur acting, makes it then desirable to select short easy-going pieces with situations which are effective, and which deal with that kind of life in which amateur actors are naturally at home: but there are comparatively few English stage plays of this description, and the amateur company will do well either to provide an amateur author, or have recourse to the more usual expedient of translation from the French. Even this favourite resource is beset with difficulties, for the ordinary theme of the ordinary French dramatist is unfit for drawing-room performance, and an English lady shrinks from the part of an adventuress or a frivolous wife. If we look back across the bridge of seventy years we shall find the same perplexities attending an amateur company of that period, the family of the Bertrams, in Miss Austen's novel of *Mansfield Park*—a novel not claiming to be historical, but so completely true in its representations of social life and character that

in fidelity there is scarcely a history which can compare with it. Here is a description given in its pages of the selection of a play for private performance :—

"No piece could be proposed that did not supply somebody with a difficulty, and on one side or the other it was a continual repetition of, 'Oh, no, that will never do. Let us have no ranting tragedies. Too many characters—not a tolerable woman's part in the play. Anything but THAT, my dear Tom. It would be impossible to fill it up; one could not expect anybody to take such a part. I shall be happy to be of any use, but I think we could choose nothing worse.'

'This will never do,' said Tom Bertram at last. 'We are wasting time most abominably. Something must be fixed on. No matter what, so that something is chosen. We must not be so nice; a few characters too many must not frighten us: we must *double them*.' "

Finally these doubts resolve themselves into the fatal choice of a drama called the *Lovers' Vows*, which only lives now by Miss Austen's record, but which was popular in her time. A description of the confidences made to the prompter during the rehearsals is worth quoting. "So far from being all satisfied and all enjoying, she found everybody requiring something they had not, and giving

occasion of discontent to the others. Everybody had a part either too long or too short; nobody would attend as they ought. Nobody would remember on which side they were to come in. Nobody but the complainer would observe any directions."

"A few characters too much must not frighten us," says Tom Bertram; and here Miss Austen has indicated what she had clearly suffered from in private theatricals, where, indeed, it is an object of great importance not to crowd the scenes; for long and patient practice is required on the stage to avoid hustling awkward entrances and impossible exits where there are many principal personages present at once. In the management of complicated groups amateur awkwardness will generally betray itself. It is in drawing-room pieces, where the characters are few, where the dialogue is natural, and where the situations are either very amusing or very interesting, that an amateur company is likely to appear to the best advantage, and under these conditions they may often afford as much entertainment as the general run of professional players; or even, supposing them to rehearse much and carefully together, and to be well matched as to natural gifts, they may produce a more pleasing effect of harmony and grace than are often to be found at our

theatres. Add to this the enjoyment of all the performers and the social pleasure of frequent meetings; and we may find a larger amount of satisfaction in the sum total than that produced by ordinary public performances.

The same jealousies and difficulties attendant on private theatricals which are described by Miss Austen in *Mansfield Park* have also been dwelt upon by Miss Edgeworth in one of her cleverest novels, *Patronage;* and it would seem from what is said by both writers that amateurs of old were more ambitious than they are apt to be now. The play chosen by the Falconers, by whom the private theatricals in *Patronage* are got up, is a no less difficult, and it may be added dreary, one than *Zara*, the translation by Aaron Hill of Voltaire's *Zaïre*. The young lady who appears as the heroine wears in the first act a "delicate, soft, sentimental blue satin, with silver fringe, looped with pearl," and in the last a costume of bridal white and silver. When on the night of performance the audience arrive, "they ask in whispers, 'Do you know if there is to be any clapping of hands? Can you tell me whether it is allowable to say anything?'"

"It seems," continues Miss Edgeworth, "that at some private theatres loud demonstrations of applause were forbidden. It was thought more

genteel to approve and admire in silence, thus to draw the line between professional actors and actresses, and gentlemen and lady performers. Upon trial, however, in some instances, it had been found that the difference was sufficiently obvious without marking it by any invidious distinction. Young and old amateurs have acknowledged that the silence, however genteel, was so dreadfully awful that they preferred even the noise of vulgar acclamations."

Then follows some description of the play, the heroine of which, we are told, really played uncommonly well, being but feebly supported by the other performers, one of whom, the confidante, was sulky at not having the principal part. "The faults common to unpractised actors occurred. One of Osman's arms never moved, and the other sawed the air perpetually, as if in pure despite of Hamlet's prohibition. Then, in crossing over, Osman was continually entangled in Zara's robe, or, when standing still, she was obliged to twitch her train thrice before she could get it from beneath his leaden feet. When confident that he could repeat a speech fluently, he was apt to turn his back upon his mistress, or when he felt himself called upon to listen to his mistress, he would regularly turn his back upon the audience. But all these are defects permitted by the license of a private

theatre, allowable by courtesy to gentlemen actors; and things went on as well as could be expected. Osman had not his part by heart, but still Zara covered all deficiencies. And Osman did no worse than other Osmans have done before him, till he came to the long speech beginning with,

"'The Sultans, my great ancestors, bequeath'd
Their empire to me, but their tastes they gave not.'

"Powerful prompting got him through the first six lines decently enough, till he came to,

"'Wasting tenderness in wild profusion
I might look down to my surrounded feet
And their contending beauties.'

At this he bungled sadly—his hearing suddenly failing as well as his memory, there was a dead stop. In vain the prompter, the scene-shifter, the candle-snuffer, as loud as they could, and much louder than they ought, reiterated the next sentence,

"'I might speak
Serenely slothful.'

"It was plain that Osman could not speak, nor was he 'serene.' He had begun, as in dangers great he was wont, to kick his left ancle-bone rapidly with his right heel; and through the pomp of Osman's oriental robes and turban, young

Petcalf stood confessed. He threw back an angry look at the prompter,—Zara, terrified, gave up all for lost.—The polite audience struggled not to smile.—Zara, recovering her presence of mind, swept across the stage in such a manner as to hide from view her kicking Sultan; and as she passed, she whispered the line to him so distinctly that he caught the sound, left off kicking, went on with his speech, and all was well again. Fortunately for Zara and for the audience in the next scenes, the part of Lusignan was performed by a gentleman who had been well used to acting—though he was not a man of any extraordinary capacity, yet, from his *habit of the boards*, and his being perfect in his part, he now seemed quite a superior person. It was found unaccountably easier to act with this son of labour than with any other of the gentlemen performers, though they were all natural geniuses."

The foregoing extract goes to prove that Miss Edgeworth had, in addition to her other accomplishments, a nice faculty of dramatic criticism, and that ordinary amateurs in her day were not unlike ordinary amateurs now. Extraordinary amateur actors sometimes appear, and of these Charles Dickens was the most remarkable we have ever seen, and it is hardly too much to say, the most remarkable that

has ever existed, not only because he was a great novelist, but because he had a distinct vocation for the stage, and because his immense energy found means in the midst of his complicated arduous professional work so to tutor his dramatic instinct that he was no less an artist than an actor. In pathetic melodrama and broad farce he was equally excellent: there was a twinkle in his eye when he felt the fun of a ludicrous situation which was irresistible, and he had endless varieties of humour, both in countenance and action. His pathos was manly and natural, and his eyes, fiery and piercing, could express unutterable tenderness. The quality of his voice was not habitually sweet, but it had many changes at command, and he could when necessary subdue it to gentleness. His articulation was faultless, and he spoke perfect English, one of the rarest attainments in public performers.

Of all professional actors the one whom he most resembled was Frédéric Lemaître, and those who have seen that great French player can form some notion of the leading characteristics of our English novelist as a dramatic performer. When he intended to draw tears, they came; when he meant you to laugh, you laughed as much as he chose. His power of organisation made him also a first-rate manager. He could

direct scene-shifting and picturesque groups; he could fill in bye-play, and, in short, he was a complete master of stage business, so that whatever drama he conducted was sure to be produced in the best possible way. Any one who has had the good fortune to witness the performances at Tavistock House can certify that all this is true. Macready, after his own retirement from the stage, was present at the performance of *The Frozen Deep*, by Dickens and his friends in 1857, and writing his impressions of it said, "It was remarkably, extraordinarily clever, in all respects. The acting uncommonly good; I mean positively so, and rendered so much more effective by the general harmony of the party. I do not wonder at your having recourse to your cambric. The performance excited me very much."

It is to be observed that Charles Dickens had not the vice of wishing to shine alone, but surrounded himself with men of talent and intellect, who were capable of making a mark for themselves, and who respected each other. From these conditions resulted a harmony too seldom to be met with in English dramatic representations.

To hear Dickens read was a privilege, but to see him act was a much greater one; for no one who has the true genius of an actor can find its complete development in dramatic reading. Bound to a

desk the reader wants space; he cannot give way to his impetus; he is perpetually hampered. However, it must be said that the readings of Dickens had none of the inherent defects of dramas declaimed, for he never read anything but narrative, his own stories or novels, to which he could give the truest and best effect, and so it was in its way first-rate; but it had not and could not have the power of his acting.

Dickens was so much a student of acting that he could only be called an amateur because he never appeared upon the stage professionally. It is recorded that he was on one occasion reproached for not doing so by a carpenter at the Haymarket, who, elated by his excellent suggestions as to a piece in progress, and mindful only of the things he knew, paid a doubtful compliment to the great author when he exclaimed, "Oh, Mr. Dickens, sir, the world had a great loss when you took to literature!"

Perhaps many successful amateurs imagine that if the stage were open to them they could do wondrous things, but they only think so because they are not aware of the great difficulties of dramatic art. Some have unluckily proved their error, but these failures are forgotten in the very obscurity of the performers, and only a few signal examples of success are recorded and hopefully quoted.

Our Garrick, and the French tragedian Le Kain are perhaps the most brilliant instances of this kind.

In our own time Madame Pasca, distinguished as a tragic actress, performed in amateur theatricals before she went upon the public stage; and so did the late Charles Mathews; and we have now at the Prince of Wales's Theatre an actor and artist of mark in Mr. Arthur Cecil, who was well-known as an amateur actor before he went on the stage. He, like other fine actors, has learnt how to apply the resources of art to a natural inclination. And his success is among the instances of what art and instinct combined can accomplish. Without the impulse of the strong natural emotion which is called inspiration, the actor's art might seem mechanical, and without the art this emotion would be fitful, inharmonious, perhaps clamorous, and certainly unsatisfactory.

In all cases where amateurs have become distinguished actors there has been a period of patient study and training before the final transition from the drawing-room to the great stage. It seems necessary to insist upon this, because it is sometimes asserted that acting is nothing but a natural impulse, which you only have to give way to in order to succeed. To say this is to assume that acting is not an art at all, for art means work, and no artistic excellence

whatsoever has ever been obtained without labour, and without some form of assiduous apprenticeship. It is true, however, that negligent performances of every kind may be admired by an ignorant portion of the public, and it is also true that this may be a large portion, but a reputation easily gained will easily decline, and the uninformed judgment will not confer a lasting fame.

CHAPTER II.

EXAMPLE OF THE CONSERVATOIRE.

THE two continental countries where acting is to be seen at its best are France and Germany, and in both these countries it is a matter of national importance and education. At the Conservatoire of Paris, Regnier, Got, and Delaunay are the leading teachers. All three are admirable artists in their different ways; and when we describe a lesson at which we were recently present it will be seen that the manner of teaching is not calculated to cramp, but to excite and vivify all the intelligence and feeling of the pupils. Out of the four candidates whom we heard not one was in any single passage called upon to recite after the manner of the professor (M. Delaunay), nor did he on any occasion repeat the lines himself. Seated in an arm-chair which might represent the centre of

the stalls, he watched the young students in every gesture on their little stage, and listened carefully to every inflection of the voice; he rarely interrupted them in the middle of a speech. Two young girls and two young men were the performers on this occasion. First in order was a very young lady, who went through a famous scene with Arnolphe, her jealous guardian, in *L'Ecole des Femmes*. She was not without grace, nor without appreciation of the meaning of her author in particular lines; but at the conclusion of the scene the master said, "You have learned the words of this scene correctly, but I think I perceive that you are not familiar with the whole play. Can you tell me all that has occurred in the preceding act, and all that occurs in the following acts?"

"No, sir. I have read only one or two scenes."

"Ah! then I understand the faults that I saw, for how can you imagine all the varieties of expression which belong to your part if you don't know the exact relation of one character to another, and the significance of every portion of the drama as it bears upon the intention of the whole? Believe me that you should know every other part almost as well as your own if you aspire to give a true interpretation of your author. I do not propose to repeat to you any special passages where

you missed his intention, but to give an explanation of the situation you represent by telling you as rapidly as I can what has gone before and what comes after."

He then went through a summary of the plot, short and clear, dwelling especially upon the meaning to be brought out in the scene chosen for representation, after which he requested a repetition of the performance. The pupil was intelligent; she listened attentively to the professor's explanation, and her subsequent performance was a great improvement on the first. It had gained life, for she knew what she was about, and could put in a little effective bye-play, where before she was at a loss from a want of knowledge beyond that of her own special part. When she got down from the platform to take her place on one of the crowded benches which flanked the professor on either side, he requested her to read the comedy all through with careful study before she again recited her scene or scenes before him.

A candidate for great characters followed in the part of Andromaque. At the conclusion of the recitation the master said:

"You have read this tragedy I know; but you must study it a good deal more; you have missed the intention of a passage in your third speech by failing to dwell on a word which ought to be

pressed upon your audience, for it is your key-note. I will not repeat the passage myself, but I beg you to repeat it and try to find for yourself the emotion which has to be marked. If I tell it you, it will not be yours : discover it for yourself, and you will not only appreciate this particular thing, but you will have learnt the true delight of the artist, which is to seek and find."

The pupil repeated the speech a second time unsuccessfully ; the teacher then assisted her by a vivid description of Andromaque's situation, but without specially indicating the passage which had failed in force. At the third repetition the pupil found it out for herself, and got down from the platform eager and joyful. As she took her seat by the other pupils, the master said :

" I hope you will, as soon as you return home, read over this act again, and ask yourself whether I am not right as to the leading emotion which you have to indicate. Read before you forget what I have told you : remember that it is easy to forget ! "

" No ! " exclaimed the girl, with enthusiasm, " it is not easy to forget such teaching. I never *can* forget, sir, what you have said."

After this came a young man who recited a scene from Racine very creditably, and then an unhappy Hippolyte in Racine's *Phèdre*, who knew neither words nor sense correctly, and hoped to

atone for this by noise. He spluttered and stuttered, went off with a bang, and stopped short with a stare. In vain the reader of the other part prompted: it was hopeless, and all that could be said by the professor was:

"You have everything to do, for nothing is done. Never come before me again imperfect in your words. How can I hope to point out to you the sense of what you don't let me hear?" He then added: "You must none of you come here expecting to hear me recite your parts. Whenever you fail to understand the intention of the author or miss the means of showing it by faulty execution, I will not fail to point it out to you; but you must remedy it by your own art, not by making a copy of mine. The only thing in which I ask you to resemble me is in an indefatigable loving labour in your profession. The delight of an artist is the study and labour which reach their aim: the genius of an artist is the fervent impulse which makes this study the happiness of his life."

After the breaking up of the meeting, a few pupils, young men, lingered on to obtain further counsels from the professor. One of these had been offered an engagement at a very minor theatre, and asked if it would be wise to accept it. "No, by no means. Wait to act till you *can* act, and then appear, not among a company of slovenly

inferiors, but among artists whose performances will excite your ambition."

It is difficult to imagine any teaching better than this of the Conservatoire for the training of artists, and even amateurs cannot fail to listen to it with advantage, for the disposition to attend to your own part to the neglect of others is a fault as natural to an unprofessional as to a professional actor, and is the more often evident in drawing-room performances, because of the general infrequency of rehearsals. It may be observed that among the four pupils above referred to in M. Delaunay's class, only one had to be reproved for indistinct articulation, and his spluttering speech was chiefly due to ignorance of his words. The truth is, that it is easier to be articulate in French than in English, for the tendency of the French language is an even accentuation of each syllable, while in English one syllable is sounded for three that are slurred. English readers or actors have to strive against this habit: if they strive too much, their speech sounds foreign; if too little, it is careless.

We have already mentioned among amateurs an example of perfect pronunciation in Charles Dickens, but it is needless to say that he is not the only one who has excelled in that respect, and that on our public stage there is to be heard

some first-rate elocution, only it is fair to remember that English actors deserve the more credit because of the natural obstacles in their way. They swim across a rough sea. The Germans have the same trouble to contend with, but they are a strong, persevering people in whatever they undertake, and it is very rare to find a German actor indistinct.

The Italians have in this matter, as in most others, great natural facilities. Their language lends itself to distinctness, and their lungs are so developed by their gracious climate, that the only risk they run is that of being too loud, and the underlings in an Italian drama are often painfully so. In English it is quite possible to be both loud and indistinct—we should rather say easy than possible, for in all languages it is an achievement within reach. Rachel was sometimes accused of this fault in her rapid passages of passion ; but the swiftness of utterance that interfered with her complete articulation was very rare.

Audibility is as necessary for amateurs as for artists, and requires in them a greater effort, as the habits of good breeding discourage loud talking and tolerate indistinctness, at least in England.

The gifts which amateurs bring to their representations are usually good manners, good English, and delicate perceptions. These, well fitted with

plays to exhibit them, and helped by a reasonable amount of study and frequent rehearsals, may produce a very agreeable effect without any intricacies of scenery. A few screens may be so arranged in a drawing-room as to give a sufficient variety of exits and entrances, leaving the street or the garden to the imagination of the spectator. Where so much has to be done to ensure harmony in the acting, and where so many things have to be learnt, it seems on the whole best not to admit scenic complications, though when amateurs play in a theatre of their own some painted scenery must be indispensable.

Amateur acting was a court fashion in the Elizabethan period in England and later on. Ben Jonson's masks, written expressly for occasions of royal revelry, are among the most graceful of his compositions; and Milton, in the time of the Commonwealth, bestowed some of the best treasures of his imagination upon a masque to be played by an aristocratic company. This was *Comus*, presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634, before John, Earl of Bridgewater, President of Wales, the principal personages being acted by Lord Brackley, Mr. Thomas Egerton, his brother, and Lady Alice Egerton. The piece was not at once openly acknowledged by its author, but it was so much appreciated and desired, and so

many copies were demanded, that before long its publication became a matter of necessity. It is certainly one of Milton's most beautiful works. The amateur diction must have been remarkably good in that time, supposing the drama to have been intelligibly recited, for of all poetry Milton's is the most difficult to speak, with its swelling sounds and its long involved periods. A careful study of the breathing-places is required in order to interpret the sense of the author, and when to this is added the value of his words in their grand harmonies, it must be admitted that finished art, much thought, and considerable natural gifts are demanded for such a recitation. *Comus* was brought out by Macready with marked success at Drury Lane, Miss Helen Faucit and himself appearing in the principal characters, but it may be doubted whether so happy a result is likely again to be attained either in public or private representation.

Mr. Dutton Cook, in some interesting papers (contributed to *Once a Week* in 1865) on *Amateur Actors,* has recorded, along with the performance of *Comus* just referred to, various remarkable amateur performances, among them one of "A Pleasant Comedie" called *Lingua,* and ascribed to Anthony Brewer, who wrote also *The Countrie Girl* (1647) and *The Love-Sick King.* On somewhat doubtful

authority, Cromwell is said to have played in a representation of this, the part of Tactus, who in an early scene "finds the crown which is the subject of contention among the various characters," and exclaims—

> "Do I not sleep and dream of this good luck, ha?
> No, I am awake and feel it now:
> Mercury, all's mine own; here's none to cry half's mine:
> Was ever man so fortunate as I?"

Later on come the lines:—

> "How princely do I speak! how sharp I threaten!
> Peasants, I'll curb your headstrong impudence,
> And make you tremble when the lion roars
> Ye earth-bred worms!"

Among the most curious of the instances collected by Mr. Dutton Cook is the performance in 1751 at Drury Lane, obtained for one night only from Garrick, of *Othello* with the following cast:—

Othello	Sir Francis Delaval.
Iago	John Delaval, Esq.
Cassio	—— Delaval, Esq.
Brabantio and Ludovico	Sim Fine, Esq.
Roderigo	Captain Stephen.
Desdemona	Mrs. Quon.
Emilia	Mrs. Stevens.

Horace Walpole wrote to Mann of this performance, that there had been two events not political, equal to any absurdities or follies of former years.

One of these was "a play acted by people of some fashion at Drury Lane, hired on purpose. They really acted so well that it is astonishing they should not have had sense enough not to act at all. . . . . The rage was so great to see the performance that the House of Commons literally adjourned at three o'clock on purpose; the footmens' gallery was strung with blue ribands. What a wise people! What an august senate!" The dresses, says Kirkman, in his *Life of Macklin*, "were not only magnificent but well fancied and adapted to the characters. Othello's was a robe in the fashion of his country; Roderigo's an elegant modern suit, and Cassio's and Iago's very rich uniforms."

It is not likely that in our days any amateur company will be moved to attempt *Othello* at Drury Lane by reading how Sir Francis Delaval's embracing Desdemona "set many a fair breast among the audience a palpitating," or how Mr. John Delaval as Iago, "delighted and astonished his audience," but if such an event were to take place, the dresses would probably be better "fancied and adapted to the characters," than "elegant modern suits and rich uniforms."

Mr. Dutton Cook quotes another passage from Walpole's letters concerning Lord Barrymore who had a passion for acting, and who built a

magnificent theatre at Wargrave. "Last night," wrote Walpole on the 12th August 1790, "the Earl of Barrymore was so humble as to perform a buffoon dance and act *Scaramouch* in a pantomime at Richmond, for the benefit of Edwin, junior, the comedian; and I, like an old fool, but calling myself a philosopher that loves to study human nature in all its disguises went to see the performance." At Wargrave, Lord Barrymore's favourite parts "were *Scrub, Bobadil, Hob,* and *Gregory Gubbins.*"

Readers of the lately published *Life of Charles Mathews,* will remember the interesting account there given of the private theatricals got up by Lord Normanby at Florence.

In France it was in the eighteenth century that private theatricals were most in vogue. Dukes and duchesses, counts and countesses, the marquis and his valets all flitted from one country house to another with costumes and musical instruments to act plays for the neighbourhood. They had well practised memories, for when not acting plays they were composing verses and reciting them to each other, so they thought nothing too long; and all varieties of drama were welcome. One night there would be proverbs, the next *Zaïre,* another night a pastoral ballet, and the following one *Phèdre:* a pleasant mixture of Racine, Voltaire, Marivaux, and ballet-masters.

Nothing was too important and nothing too trivial for these energetic performers. According to their own memoirs success infallibly crowned their efforts in every direction: neighbours numerous and happy flocked to see them; heavy carriages heavily laden rolled over still heavier roads and nobody thought any trouble too much. It was a universal animation and satisfaction; there seems to have been hardly any quarrelling: a spirit of enjoyment was the reigning sentiment, and the vivacity of the actors communicated itself to the audience. They were people of courtly manners and of general accomplishment, and threw an airy grace into their divers representations which, however unsuited to some of the characters, must have been agreeable to see. It is well known how eagerly this amusement was taken up at Versailles by Marie Antoinette, who in her enthusiasm for acting too frequently postponed more serious matters, and occasionally replied to a minister asking for an audience, that she could not come just then, for she was rehearsing.

Louis XVI. took delight in her acting and applauded every movement, but she does not seem to have had any remarkable talent for personation. Her beauty, her musical voice, and her perfect elocution made her performances

charming, but the costume of a peasant never disguised the queen, and whatever efforts she made to throw it off, her majesty was always present. However, it amused the king to see his queen in the dress of a shepherdess; he liked to feel her natural nobility shining through, little knowing under what threadbare garments it would appear in the time to come.

These performances entailed great expense and lost much time, a reproach which many private theatricals incur and no doubt sometimes deserve, but discretion only is needed to guard against such results. A well-chosen piece will not require splendour of costume or scenery, and as we have before said amateurs will generally appear to best advantage when their accessories are simple. The whole tone of the acting is necessarily more subdued than that of the public stage, and if scenic effects are not subdued so as to correspond with it the representation will be inharmonious.

The greatest mistake an amateur can make is to imitate the characteristics of any public performer, not only because direct imitation is a sterile thing, but because amateur dramatic art is different in its essence from professional art. The same sharp effects cannot be made and should not be attempted.

These remarks will apply to the performance of musical pieces as well as plays, though they may require still more rehearsing. A light operetta may be agreeably given by a set of ladies and gentlemen accustomed to singing together, but the music should be very light, for the great axiom in these things must be not to let the effort surpass the power—in other words to avoid what is difficult. As for the poetical masques which were produced in the time of our ancestors, it must be remembered that they were brought out either at the royal court or in some great castle where magnificence was habitual, and where rich apparel was the order of the day. In an interesting historical novel recently published called *Strafford* (by Mr. Barton Baker), there occurs a description of a masque written by Shirley and arranged by Inigo Jones which it is worth while to quote here. The masque was in celebration of the conclusion of peace, and was given by the Inns of Court to the king and his ministers.

"And now the masque began.

"The curtains opened upon an elaborate set-scene—an open place upon which were built out-palaces, porticoes, houses, and in the extreme background, in the midst of a garden-like landscape, the Forum of Peace.

"After the appearance of several allegorical characters, who spoke and sang, this changed to the interior of a tavern divided into drinking-rooms, and upon the windows of which was reflected the red glare of the setting sun. And here came on the rabble rout of the anti-masque, the gambols of whom very much resembled the comic scene of a Christmas pantomime. This was closed in by a woody landscape in which the anti-masque of birds went through some grotesque movements and dances. When this was over the stage darkened. Then in the highest part of the heavens there broke a whitish cloud out of which came forth a golden chariot of exquisite workmanship, in which sat Peace. When it had descended, the goddess stepped out and sang two songs.

"After this there appeared on the opposite side of the heavens a crimson cloud, which disclosed a silver chariot bearing Ennoma, or Law, clad in a purple satin robe, studded with golden stars, and a mantle of carnation laced with gold. When she had sung, the middle heavens showed a cloud of pale blue, and a third chariot, in which reposed the figure of Justice.

"After these personages had sung a trio, the scene again changed, showing sixteen masquers dressed in carnation and silver, pyramidically

arranged upon terraces rising one above the other; over their heads was an arbour of green trees, between the branches of which could be seen glimpses of blue sky; more singing, and another comic interlude by the anti-masque.

"After this came darkness, a sombre sky, out of which shone the new moon, and a faint light in the east harbingered the breaking day.

"While the spectators were contemplating this picture there arose a thick vapour out of which gradually developed the form of a young girl clad in dark blue showered with silver spangles; in her hand she held a dimly burning torch; this figure represented the Dawn. After delivering a long poetical speech the cloud bore her out of sight, and this was the end.

"Then the company, to the strains of a grand march left the hall and proceeded to an apartment where a magnificent banquet awaited them."

Such were the grandiose entertainments of those days, mingling music, scenic display, and poetry. Shirley was a poet of considerable distinction, and it was thought worth while to engage his talents for the songs sung by the personages of the show. The best known now of all he wrote is the song beginning:—

> "The glories of our Blood and state
> Are shadows, not substantial things."

And it may well be believed that the writer of such sounding verse as this would be popular with amateur actors.

The largest part of an entertainment like this masque would of course be the work of the manager; and Inigo Jones is best remembered for his picturesque buildings, though he was not what we should call an architect, but rather, like Sir Christopher Wren, an amateur. Although he abandoned the irregular graces of Gothic, and preferred to work in the comparatively stately Italian style, his power of producing, with moderate means, a grand scenic effect, has never been surpassed. The colonnades at Greenwich are a standing monument to his genius, and we may feel sure that in a masque he would be able to make the most of his opportunities.

While such magnificent shows as Inigo Jones devised were presented at private mansions, the public stage had to be content, and contented its audience, with far less ambitious illustrations of the playwright's text. The chorus in *Henry V.* dwells apologetically upon the shortcomings of the scene-painter's and machinist's art, and speaks of the stage as "an unworthy scaffold," a "cockpit," and a "wooden O;" and the curious picture on page 38, taken from William Alabaster's Latin

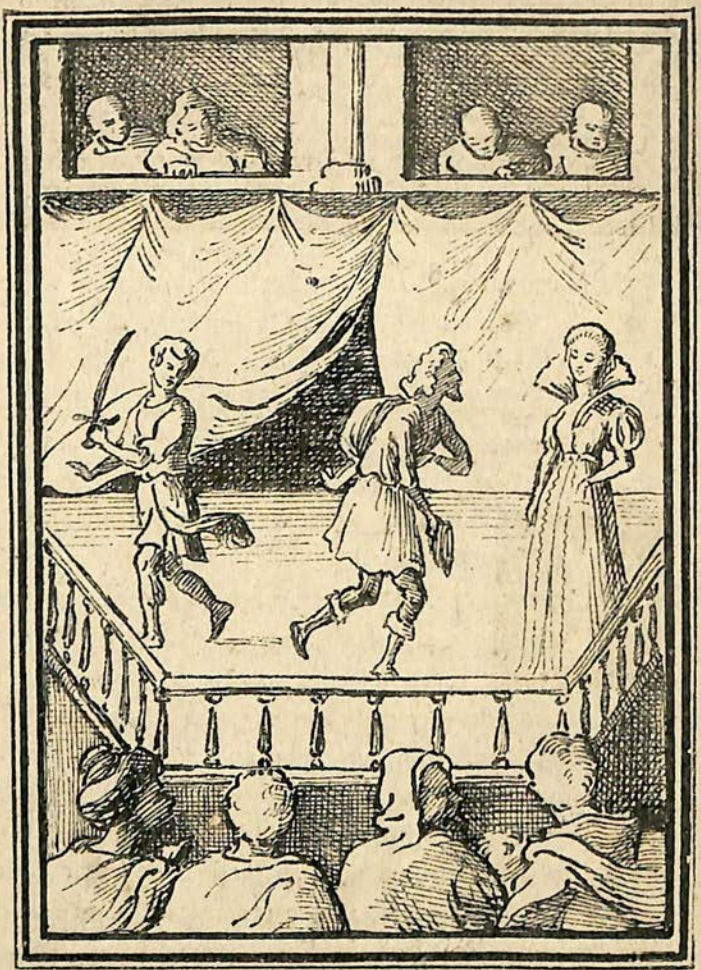
play of *Roxana*,[1] shows how much the poet and the actors trusted to the effect which their imaginations would have on those of the spectators. Playwrights of our days, much later than the time of Mr. Vincent Crummles and his real tubs, have insured success for inferior dramatic works by the profuse employment upon the stage of things which an audience sees without noticing them every day in real life, but greets with enthusiasm when they are presented under the glare of the footlights. What is the secret of this enthusiasm it might be idle to inquire; the trick is as old, to go no further back, as the days of the *Spectator*, in which Addison pointed out its folly and inconsistency in these words:—"A little skill in criticism would inform us that shadows and realities ought not to be mixed together in the same piece. If one would represent a wide champaign country filled with flocks and herds, it would be ridiculous to draw the country only upon the scenes,

[1] *Roxana* was published in 1632, and a copy is in the British Museum. The frontispiece, or engraved title, has a border representing various scenes in the play, in little compartments, the whole page being only of the smallest "old 8vo." size, or about eight inches by four. The cut here reproduced has been carefully enlarged from the central compartment of the lower border, and is the only representation of the kind yet recognised. We are indebted to Mr. Edmund W. Gosse for bringing it to our knowledge—but Mr. Swinburne was, we believe, the first to notice its importance.

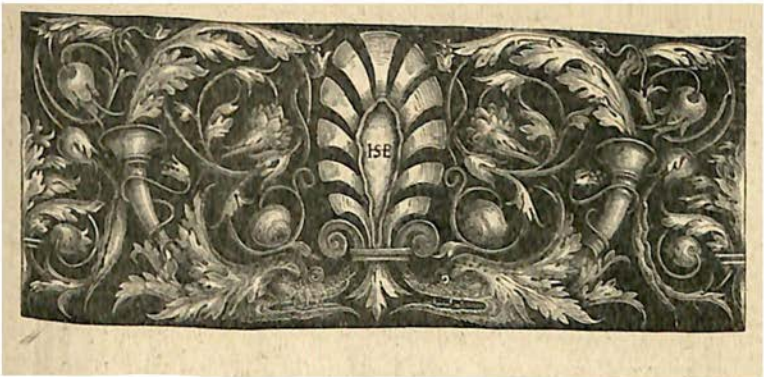
and to crowd several parts of the stage with sheep and oxen. This is joining together inconsistencies and making the decorations partly real and partly imaginary."

The stage of which we have here a picture has no such attractions as those to which Addison objected; it relies upon the simplest methods of suggesting all that is to be in the minds of the audience. The curtains and balustrade at the back serve for the watch-tower, from which a herald speaks, for Juliet's balcony, and for the "aside" appearances of any characters in any plays. And the knowledge of how much was done with such simple appliances may save amateurs from some terrors and heartburnings.

The pantomime of our times has taken the places of masques, and amateurs occasionally appear as harlequin, clown, and pantaloon, and exhibit enough dexterity to surprise their audiences who can laugh, whether at a success or a failure, and have no demand made upon their serious attention. Ease is the charm of amateur performances, and as long as you keep clear of length and tedium you are tolerably sure of pleasing your friends when you act for them.



THE STAGE OF SHAKESPEARE.



CHAPTER III.

STAGE DIRECTIONS.

IT is often said that private theatricals are, for the most part, far better fun for the actors than for the audience —and so they are likely to be, unless amateurs will content themselves with less ambitious pieces and less elaborate scenery than they are wont to desire. What possible amusement can it be to their friends, to look on at a play which, however well managed, is only a feeble imitation of what they have seen well put upon the stage? The interest excited by private theatricals is in great part due to personal feeling, that is, to the recognition of your familiar acquaintances under the assumption of new names characters, and dresses. We have already said

how difficult it is to find a play well suited for this purpose—a piece new enough, bright enough, and above all short enough to give complete satisfaction. Farces as a rule should be avoided, because their fun generally consists in jokes too broad to please a drawing-room audience. It adds much to the effect, and also helps the actors to lose their self-consciousness, if the piece is one of costume; but costumed plays are apt to be long, and amateurs, if they run into length, run into tedium. A little care and ingenuity may, however, shorten a stage play without spoiling it, and scissors judiciously used may turn some tiresome old pieces into lively new ones.

Having chosen the play, the next thing to do is to choose a stage-manager. Another difficulty, for the stage-manager must not act himself, but be prepared to direct every one, and to do this he must know a great deal about acting, and have an artist's eye for the picturesque in order to arrange the positions of the actors throughout the piece and the tableaux at the end of each act. He must also have tact and good temper, for amateur actors and actresses have usually their full share of vanity, and are apt to imagine that they know where to stand and how to speak better than any one else. We once heard a gentleman who was reproved for doing something

absurd and out of place in his part, say—"Oh yes, that is your idea of it, I prefer mine." Of course we then knew that he was hopeless, and must spoil the piece—and so he did.

If amateurs would consent to act before a long looking-glass they would not fail to perceive the frequent awkwardness of their gestures, and would be convinced that a stage-manager, looking on from the front, must be the best judge of their acting. Another reason for having a good, and *firm* stage-manager is that he may determine the cast of the parts. Each actor naturally aspires to the first part, and is distressed if he is kept in the background. Personal appearance must also be consulted, and this is a tender point. If the principal character in the piece is a dashing young man, it is absurd to give it to a stout, middle-aged man, however well he may act, and all the more absurd because of the difficulty in "making up" for a drawing-room play; then again when the heroine is a young lady whose beauty is much commented on in the play, it is cruel to deliver her into the hands of a woman of fifty.

It is not uncommon for a person gifted with a comical appearance and voice to insist that his strong point is pathos, and it requires considerable skill and even eloquence on the part of the stage-manager to persuade him that he is in error.

In *Recollections of Writers*, by Mr. and Mrs. Cowden Clarke, there is a very good description of Charles Dickens as stage-manager to his amateur company. "Occasionally he would leave his seat at the managerial table, and stand with his back to the foot-lights, in the very centre of the front of the stage, and view the whole effect of the rehearsed performance as it proceeded, observing the attitudes and positions of those engaged in the dialogue, their mode of entrance, exit, &c., &c. He never seemed to overlook anything; but to note the very slightest point that conduced to the 'going well' of the whole performance; with all this supervision it was pleasant to remark the utter absence of dictatorialness or arrogation of superiority that distinguished his mode of ruling his troop. He exerted his authority firmly and perpetually; but in such a manner as to make it universally felt to be for no purpose of self-assertion or self-importance; on the contrary, to be for the sole purpose of ensuring general success to their united efforts."

Amateurs cannot rehearse too often; the oftener they repeat and act their parts, the less nervous they will be at the performance, and the less liable they will be to put each other out; private theatricals are frequently made intolerable by imperfectly learned words. If a speech, or part of a speech,

is forgotten, there is either an awkward pause, or the next speaker will go on with his part regardless of the nonsense it will make; then having discovered that he has made a mistake, the unlucky actor is confused, and nervous, and makes many more mistakes. The same thing is true as to entrances, exits, and positions on the stage; unless they have been rehearsed so often that there cannot possibly be an error, disastrous consequences may ensue. If the actor says: "Here she comes," looking at the door where *she* does not come, the audience will naturally smile, although the author hopes for tears; and when heated and flurried after a long wait the lady appears at an opposite entrance, the smile grows into a laugh.

It is impossible to insist upon a special mode of learning words. Every one has a different way of learning by heart, but it is well to make a strict rule to forbid the use of books after the first rehearsal, and it is better to trust to the prompter than to hold a book constantly in your hand, for the position of the body and the expression of the face are both lost if the book is held. It is also not wise to trust to the excitement on the night of the first performance as a stimulus to acting, for if it does so affect one performer as to suggest happy thoughts and new attitudes, the other actors

will be thrown out of gear by these novelties. It is therefore desirable at all rehearsals to act as well as possible, and to make the last two rehearsals run as smoothly as if they were played to an audience.

Mrs. Cowden Clarke says: "The rehearsals under Charles Dickens's stage-management were strictly devoted to work—serious earnest work; the consequence was that, when the evening of the performance came, the pieces went off with a smoothness and polish that belong only to finished stage-business and practised performers."

If there are many serious rehearsals the confidence gained by them is of great service. If the part is perfectly learned, and the position on the stage quite certain, then all the actor has to do is to throw himself into his part and become for the time the character he assumes. He cannot throw himself well into his part if his memory is on the rack.

Elocution is a thing which most amateurs entirely ignore, and yet the rudiments are easy to learn, so far at least as one may learn to avoid a squeak, a mumble, or a roar. Nervousness often causes amateur actors to look down when they are speaking, thus preventing even the front row of the audience from hearing what they say; that is the first fault to be cured. Another is that of speaking

with the back to the audience; this should be avoided, though it is equally ridiculous to keep the full face continually turned to the spectators and not to the person whom you are addressing on the stage.

You must always speak louder than in ordinary conversation, and yet not loud enough to destroy variety of intonation. It is well to raise the voice as if speaking to those at the farthest end of the room. The common rule for distinct utterance is never to drop the voice at the end of a sentence, but rather slightly to raise it. The head also should be thrown a little back, and the articulation should never be hurried or slurred. To take breath at the right moments in speaking is as important as it is in singing; want of clear articulation is often due to want of breath; and want of breath induces a drop of the voice at the conclusion of a phrase, and is fatal to elocution.

A prompter is a necessary addition to the company. The stage-manager sometimes undertakes this office; but the prompter has enough work if he does nothing else, and his office is the most important of all for ensuring the success of the play. He ought to attend the last two or three rehearsals, to be quite sure where the actors fail in their parts, and to be prepared to help them at the right moment. It has often been observed that

the same person will fail over and over again in the same place—no matter how well he knows the rest of his part; and this is especially the case when he is nervous. A prompter's part is by no means an easy one, for he has to be distinct to the actors without being heard by the audience. He should never take his eyes off the book, and ought to use a great deal of judgment in prompting; some sentences that are left out make no difference in the play, and if the other actor takes up the right cue, without harking back, the prompter can leave them alone; but if something important is forgotten he must prompt loudly to make the actors go back to the right words. If he has attended the rehearsals he will be prepared for all the pauses that occur in the acting. It is awkward in a pause, which is occupied with stage business, to hear a voice prompting loudly. It puts out the actors too—they either hurry over the business, or get confused and give it up altogether, or spoil the effect of the play by making angry signs at the prompter from the stage. This is not unfrequently done. The prompter ought to mark his book to be quite certain where to prompt, and where to wait, for it is difficult to watch the actors and not to lose the place in the book. No undertaking is more onerous than that of the amateur prompter, who has much to do, nothing to

gain, and who is the only one of the company that receives no compliments from the audience. Mr. Burnand in his very amusing and—if rightly taken—instructive book lately published under the title of *Personal Reminiscences of the A.D.C.*, says some admirable words as to the prompter's office. Having spoken of one amateur prompter as "without a rival in this difficult department of dramatic art," he goes on to say, "If any one thinks I am wrong in classing it under the head of 'Art,' let him try it himself. The prompter, like the stage-manager, should be able to enter into the spirit of every individual part; should acquire a consummate knowledge of all the words and all the business of the play; should possess sufficient imitative power to enable him to pitch the word he has to give in the same key as the actor, to whom he has to give it, is speaking in; and, on occasion, to assume any character in the piece."

It is a mistake to attempt much scenery in ordinary private theatricals; screens will generally suffice for the scenery and the entrances. If the scene lies in a drawing-room it is easy to cover the screens with pretty drapery, and to put a little, but very little, drawing-room furniture on the stage. The stage ought not to look bare; but for unpractised actors nothing is so awkward as a great deal of furniture to deal with; even the shape

of the chairs is of consequence. They must be pretty-looking chairs, and at the same time chairs which you can sit in easily, and rise from gracefully; so that they must not be either high or low; they ought to take up as little room as possible; and, unless there is a special object in having one, an arm chair should be avoided. A sofa at the back of the stage in a drawing-room scene is a good property—it looks natural, and is not in the way. The table, or tables, if more than one is wanted, ought to be small and low.

Nothing is more suitable for a drawing-room scene than a small round table, with a pretty table-cloth on it, too small to be obstructive. Books and work on it give an air of occupation, and at the side of the stage it is well to have a little writing-table, furnished with writing materials. The drapery of the scene should never be of a material which absorbs the light. To give a realistic effect to the scene, pictures may be hung on the screen. For a hall or a dining-room the drapery and furniture must be simpler and heavier—the screens draped with more sombre colours—the furniture more solid—and the stage need not be much furnished. If two such scenes occur in the same play the floor of the hall may be represented by a drugget; and bright-coloured rugs, or one large square piece of carpet may be introduced

in the drawing-room scene. If the scene is in a garden, the screen may be covered with a trellis-work of ivy and green leaves, or with green baize, and branches of ivy trailed about it. Large pots of small shrubs at the back of the stage produce a good effect, as do pots of flowers at the sides, the pots hidden by green baize to represent grass, the floor covered with green baize. A great deal of the amusement in private theatricals consists in plotting and contriving; how best to "make believe." A clever amateur may be able to paint a large landscape on a piece of linen or canvas, which will serve for most of the scenes without alteration. But scene-painting is an art in itself.

If a regular stage and scenery are put up the house becomes uninhabitable for days before the performance and days afterwards. Carpenters hammer from morning to night; rehearsals proceed with difficulty, and everything is turned out of its usual place, to say nothing of the damage done to the house; and after all this agitation the imitation of a real stage may probably be at best but a poor one. The more amateurish the scenery is the less will the audience expect, and the more easily it will be satisfied. A cottage scene is easily got up—a drugget again over the carpet, a wooden table, two or three kitchen chairs, and a wooden stool; a hat and coat, or scarlet

cloak, hung on one screen, a saucepan or two on another, with a few pots and pans produce a good enough effect.

The screens should be so placed as to serve for good entrances and exits, without any gap perceptible to the audience, for it considerably mars the effect of an entrance if the actor is seen waiting for his cue behind the scenes.

To light the stage well is an important point. All the light should be thrown upon the actors from the front of the stage, or at the front sides of the scene, so that there should be no shadows cast on their faces, as would be the case if the light came from behind or above them. Foot-lights are necessary; small oil-lamps with glass shades over them answer well; or, failing these, wax candles, if put close together, will suffice. There *must* be a wire put at a little distance from the foot-lights, and interposed between them and the stage, or the chances of the dresses catching fire are great. An actress must not have to think of the risk of fire to her dress every time she moves.

A table at each side of the stage, with a good moderator lamp on it, makes a pleasant light. There ought also to be a bracket or two on each side of the stage, with lamps on them. The more the stage can be lighted from the front the better, so that the different expressions of the face may be

well seen. The room for the audience ought to be darkened at the time of the performance, to enhance the effect of light on the stage; but as it is dismal to come into a dimly-lighted room, it is well to have the lights so managed as to make it possible to remove some of them when the curtain is drawn up. The curtain should draw up, not aside. The drawing up of the curtain wants much rehearsing to avoid a hitch. In lighting the stage it is well to avoid gas, for it is a trying light, and a hot one, and the stage ought to be kept as cool as possible.

There ought not to be much difficulty in "making up" for amateur theatricals. Very little paint is really wanted, unless the actor has to assume age, and paint wrinkles on his face. If much paint is used, the expression of the face will be diminished, and as expression is one of the principal things in acting, it is undesirable to lose any of it. A little rouge daintily put on for ladies, and a little pearl powder is all that is required. To paint the eyes is generally a mistake. It is well to rub some "blanc de perle" on the hands, as they are apt to get red with nervousness, even if they are naturally white; and if nervousness produces an unbecoming redness on the face and neck, it is well too to rub a little blanc de perle into the skin; if washed off as soon as the performance is

over, it does no harm. Wigs should be avoided if possible, as in a drawing-room, where the audience must necessarily be close to the stage, a wig can seldom be so worn as to look natural. But if the dress is a fancy one, and powdered hair is necessary, wigs are less troublesome than powder on the natural hair; great care is necessary to avoid the ridiculous effect of dark hair visible beneath them. The wig ought to be well powdered wherever it touches the skin, so that the join may not be apparent. For a costume piece the gentlemen's dresses are so difficult to arrange that it is best to hire complete suits from a theatrical *costumier*. Ladies' dresses are easily managed, especially in these days when rich materials are in vogue. Everything mean and tawdry should be rejected. What will produce a good effect on the stage will look shabby in a drawing-room. In matters of this kind, however, directions are all but useless. The clever adapter of old garments will often produce, by putting a little mind to the work, as good an effect as if the actors have carte blanche at a costumier's: and much of the amusement of the audience is caused by the ingenious makeshifts of the amateur dresser. Historical propriety must, in some cases, be studied, and innumerable histories of costume have been published of late years for the guidance

of actors. Unless you can command the services of a thoroughly well-informed dresser, however, it is better not to attempt too much in this way, as a single blunder, a single shield in false heraldry, for example, goes far to spoil the most ambitious arrangement.

When the play has received sufficient attention, the audience must be considered. It is better to have two or three representations of the play than to ask too many people for the room and crowd the spectators inconveniently. Amateurs must have good-natured audiences, and therefore their comfort must be secured. They must have a chance of seeing well without straining their necks, and with this in view the chairs in the back rows must be placed on a raised platform, and the occupants must be made comfortable. To be punctual to the time appointed in beginning, so as not to keep them waiting, will help to keep the audience in a lenient humour. The audience also has its duties; ladies should not come in such tight gloves as make applause impossible; and men should exert all their vigour to give hearty hand clappings; for a timid amateur is easily discouraged, and under the pain of a frigid reception may forget everything but his private grief and disappointment.

GOING ON.

CHAPTER IV.

STAGE DIRECTIONS (*continued*).

IT has already been said that in our opinion the less scenery is used the better things will go in an ordinary amateur performance, for we are not of course now concerned with those performances which are got up by accomplished amateurs with as much pains and expense as professional representations, and the artistic result of which, in some cases, repays the trouble given to them.

In the case of many plays suitable for private theatricals, a simple arrangement of screens will, as has been said, be enough to keep up the desired illusion. But it may be well to give some

hints as to what can be done in the way of scenery for a programme which demands either a change of scene or a scene arranged with some elaboration. Let us suppose in the first instance that two short plays are to be performed, that the scene of both is laid inside a house, but that the first is a "costume piece," the action of which passes in an old mansion, and that the second is a modern comedietta or farce, the scene of which is to be a modern drawing-room or lodging-house. If there is no objection to incurring as much trouble and expense as would be involved in hiring a portable theatre, and at the same time producing a better effect, this can be done by getting a decorator or a clever carpenter to build up a wooden framework running round three sides of the room, and containing the necessary openings for such doors and windows as the action of the two pieces requires.

This framework should be covered with the kind of paper suitable for the scene of the second and modern piece, and this papering should again be hung over with drapery, tapestry if possible, for the scene of the first and "costume" piece. The pictures hung on the wall, and the ornaments and furniture about the stage must of course be varied for the two pieces. We have seen this plan admirably carried out on an occasion when

the scene was yet further varied by having a window at the back of the stage, which in the first piece opened on a blank wall, represented by a slightly tinted canvas screen, and in the second on a landscape cleverly painted by an amateur.

If it is desirable, as in many cases it will be, to produce a scenic effect for two such pieces as we have indicated, without calling in the carpenter to build up a more or less solid framework, then large clothes-horses or screens must be disposed around the three sides of the room, and on them, instead of on the framework, must be placed the wall paper for the modern piece and the hangings for the costume play. In this case doors are easily simulated by leaving gaps between the clothes-horses or screens, and windows of a small size by filling in one partition of a clothes-horse with silk gauze to represent glass, and hanging it with window curtains.

A fireplace, if there is no small movable grate in the house, is easily made in wood by any one with a turn for carpentry, and a sheet of red foil well crumpled up and placed inside the bars will give a surprisingly exact representation of a coal fire. If the fire has to be lighted, the actor who lights it must either pull away a piece of black paper placed in front of the foil, or

arrange the foil inside the bars while his back is turned to the audience. The same effect can be produced, but in a less safe and satisfactory manner, by a candle or lamp placed inside the grate, behind a sheet of transparent red paper. For large windows, which have to open and shut and allow actors to pass in and out of them, either professional or amateur carpentry must be employed. Scenery arranged in this way is of course much less stable than a built-up framework, and will have to be handled in a somewhat gingerly fashion. If, for instance, a rapid entrance or exit has to be made by a window, the person making it must take care not to upset the whole scene in the eagerness of his movements. It is not only young amateurs who have to exercise caution in matters of this kind. We remember to have seen a celebrated actor on the London stage, who was representing a scene of comic terror in a melodrama, tremble so violently with his back against a tower, that he nearly brought the whole structure about his ears; and that the stage carpenter, who was supporting it behind was heard distinctly remonstrating with him.

Let us now suppose that with our screens arranged round the room we have for the scene of our piece to represent a garden. In this case the screens will become the garden walls, and

must be hung with some material as near the colour of red brick as possible, on which will be arranged flowers, creepers, and fruit, natural or artificial, so disposed as to show as little as may be of the supposed garden walls. The floor may be covered with green baize, and on it may be placed, wherever they will not interfere with the movements of the actors, plants, or better still, shrubs, in pots which can be concealed either with green baize or with leaves and branches. If an appearance or disappearance over the garden wall is necessary, there must be steps provided on each side of the screen, those on the audience side being concealed by foliage. A garden bench or garden chairs placed on the stage will add to the effect of the scene, and will enable the actors to avoid the fault, common to young amateurs, of standing up to deliver all their speeches.

In a street scene, unless there is a competent amateur scene-painter on the spot, a good deal must be left to the imagination. The screens can be hung either with grey or red, to indicate house walls, and if to one of them a signboard as of an inn is affixed, the audience will be at no loss to understand what kind of scene they are supposed to be looking at.

Change of scene in the middle of a piece is of course best avoided, but can be managed by

having the sides of the screens away from the audience arranged for the new scene, and by gradually shifting the screens round, taking care to keep the persons who shift them out of sight. It is simpler still, but more expensive, to have painted and rolled up scenes hired for the occasion, and it is simplest of all, and perhaps best, to recur to the method in vogue on the public stage in Shakspeare's time, and indicate the change of scene by placards hung at the back of the stage.

It frequently happens in plays of all kinds that the stage is supposed to grow darker or lighter, either suddenly or by degrees. Most of our readers have probably observed how, when the stage of a real theatre is dark, the appearance of one small candle creates a sudden blaze of light, which is of course produced by the prompter's turning up the stage lights when, or, if things are badly managed, before, the candle makes its appearance. If gas footlights are employed in private theatricals, there is of course no difficulty in producing either a sudden or gradual increase or decrease of light. But if candles or oil lamps are used, it will be well to have some little way—say six inches—between them and the actors, a board running the whole length of the footlights and working on a hinge, so that it can either lie flat on the ground, or by an arrangement of

pulleys be moved about by the prompter so as to partially or wholly cover the footlights on the stage side. For moonlight effects tinted glass in a wooden framework can be substituted for the board. The effects of strong light, which in theatres are produced by lime-light or electric light, can in drawing-rooms be simulated, if they are only required for a few moments, by burning magnesium wire. In dark scenes it will of course be necessary to avoid making the stage so dark that the audience cannot see what is passing upon it. Special care must be taken in the case of scenes where something of importance depends on a light being suddenly turned up. We remember a misadventure which happened in such a scene where an actress had to disconcert a villain by turning up a lamp, which was burning low, so as to throw the light full on his face. At the given moment the footlights flared into a blaze of light, but the lamp, which was supposed to cause this blaze, went out. It had been turned the wrong way. All effects of this kind should be carefully rehearsed and watched from the audience part of the room before the performance takes place.

It may be necessary to indicate thunder, lightning, rain, and wind. Thunder is imitated by shaking a sheet of light iron. This, however, it may be difficult to procure, and large empty

biscuit-boxes or a large tea-tray may be employed in its place. Lightning can be imitated by blowing or scattering powdered rosin or lycopodium through the flame of a candle or of a sponge soaked in spirits of wine and fixed inside a pepper-caster, but this is a difficult matter to manage effectively unless a "lightning-box" is used. Such boxes are, we believe, to be procured, made expressly for private theatricals. Failing them, the sudden lighting and extinguishing of a magnesium wire might be tried. Rain can be imitated by playing a large watering-pot into a tin bath, or by emptying a quantity of peas from one tin box into another with ledges arranged inside for the peas to rattle on. The noise of wind, unless a machine for the purpose is procured, or unless some one with a talent for vocal mimicry will undertake it, is best left to the imagination. The tolling of a large bell can be well imitated by striking a gong; the noise of a small one, or of a clock striking the hour, by tapping a tumbler or wine glass with a knife. A perambulator may be impressed to imitate the wheels of an approaching carriage, but this is perhaps best indicated by the cracking of whips and cries of encouragement to imaginary horses. If a gun or pistol has to be fired in the course of the piece, and it is supposed that a percussion cap will not make noise enough by itself, the smallest

possible quantity of powder should be used, as the smoke is apt to hang about a room. If the appearance of smoke from a pipe is desired, a pastille, or a piece of ribbon of Bruges can be lighted in the bowl.

The question of painting the face and arranging the hair or wig, which is technically called "making up," is one of some importance. "Make-up Boxes," containing every conceivable kind of paint and powder that can be wanted are sold for this purpose by various theatrical wig-makers, and at French's in the Strand; but it is our object to show what can be done or attempted without, rather than with, these. Amateur actors as a rule are apt to overdo the painting of their faces, and it is very difficult for young people playing old parts in a drawing-room to hit the right mean, and to avoid looking, on the one hand like a tattooed savage, or on the other, like a boy or young man with a dirty face. Nothing but actual experiment under the same kind and amount of light which will be used at the performance will ensure accuracy on this point, as to which we cannot pretend to give anything beyond the advice that the amount of paint which looks natural under the lights to a person standing in what would be about the middle of the audience, may be taken to be the right amount. When the audience is

quite close to the stage it is very difficult to paint so as to deceive both the front and the back rows. We have indeed seen an amateur "make up" for an old part so as both to deceive even people standing close to him behind the scenes, and to look like an old man from the back of the audience, but this was an exceptional case. The amateur actor was a professional painter, and it had taken him about an hour to produce this effect.

As to the kind of paint to be used, good water-colours answer every purpose for ordinary theatricals. If an old make up is desired, the actor should wrinkle up his forehead before a looking-glass, and fill in the lines thus made with a mixture of red and Indian ink. The hollow between the eye and nose may be lightly touched with dark blue, "crows' feet" painted round the corner of the eye in Indian ink and red, and the lines from the corners of the nose to the mouth filled in with the same colours. These are the simple outlines of an old or elderly "make up," which can of course be varied, elaborated, or added to at the will of the actor, so long as the result is natural; and the best way of ensuring this is to study and copy closely the lines marked either on a living person's or on a portrait's face. Grey or white hair is of course produced either by powdering the natural hair or by covering it with a wig.

False hair, whiskers, eyebrows, beards, and moustaches can be easily obtained made in any shape that is required, and fitted either on wires or on gauze, which is attached to the face with what is called "spirit-gum," or with a little common glue. Both of these substances can only be got off with ease by being well saturated with oil or grease while yet on the face, before any hot or cold water is applied; and all paint comes off much more easily if cold cream or glycerine is rubbed over the face before it is washed. It is not difficult to make false hair in any required shape out of hair pads; but if this is done the moustache or whisker must be, as it were, built up bit by bit, and not stuck on in one piece, which can be done with a ready-made moustache.

The duties of the prompter have been commented on above. Besides the troublesome duties there described either he or the stage-manager will probably have also to undertake that of looking after the "properties," that is, the various pieces of furniture and so on demanded by the action of the piece. Whoever undertakes this department must see not only that everything wanted on the stage when the curtain goes up is ready in its place, but he must also make a list of the things which have to be brought on to the stage during

the piece by the actors. The convenience of this method is obvious.

Suppose, for instance, that something depends on a purse with money in it being produced by one of the characters. If there is no one told off to look after the properties, the actor just as he is going on the stage may find that he has forgotten the purse, and have to delay his entrance till it can be found; or he may not miss the purse till the moment for its production on the stage arrives, when his case will be even worse. We remember a case in which a good deal depended on one of the principal actors in a farce coming on to the stage bearing in his hand a coat-tail torn from a person with whom he had had a struggle. The coat-tail had been carefully prepared, and put in its proper place, some time before the performance, by the person who was at once stage-manager and prompter, but he had forgotten, and the actor had forgotten, to see that it was ready to the actor's hand just before the curtain went up. About five minutes before the presence of the coat-tail was necessary, the prompter was called away by some one else, who was in difficulties about his "properties," and only returned to his post in time to meet an infuriated young representative of an infuriated old man screaming

at the wing for the missing coat-tail. This had disappeared entirely, and in the end the prompter hastily took off his own coat and gave it as a sop to the distressed actor. Now a whole coat is somewhat larger than a coat-tail, and the actor was so painfully conscious of this, that in the sentence, "this coat-tail did give way," he inserted an adjective which made it more forcible, but which was not set down in his part. The chance of such a misadventure as this is prevented by stationing behind the scenes a person with a list of properties in his hand, who before each character goes on the stage shall see that he or she is provided with everything wanted for the scene. In the same way of course all letters and parcels which have to be brought on to the stage must be ready beforehand in the care of whoever looks after the properties.

In the case of a letter which has to be read out on the stage it will be convenient to have it actually written out. But the actor who has to read it should also learn the words by heart in case of any accident happening to the written copy. There is a story of an actor who omitted to learn by heart the words of a letter brought to him on the stage, and who thereby very nearly got into a serious scrape. The actor representing the servant

who brought on the letter had a grudge against the one who represented his master, and gratified it by changing the written letter for a blank sheet of paper. The master opened the letter and, unable to remember its supposed contents, was aghast at finding no words written on it. The servant, however, gave him a way out of the difficulty by exulting in his triumph and saying, "This letter seems to trouble you, sir; may I ask what bad news it contains?" On this the master, handing him the letter and replying, "Read for yourself," turned the tables on him completely.

The subject of letters reminds us that such apparently simple actions as opening or writing a letter are by no means easy to perform naturally and gracefully on the stage. Letters frequently have to be written with extraordinary rapidity in a play, and the writer must do his best to prevent this rapidity from seeming too absurd, and yet to avoid creating tiresome delay by performing the action too naturally, that is too much as he would do it in real life. For it must be remembered that what looks well enough in everyday life, will not look well on the stage. This is partly because the little actions which are not watched in everyday life are in theatricals subjected to the scrutiny of an audience; partly because acting is an art,

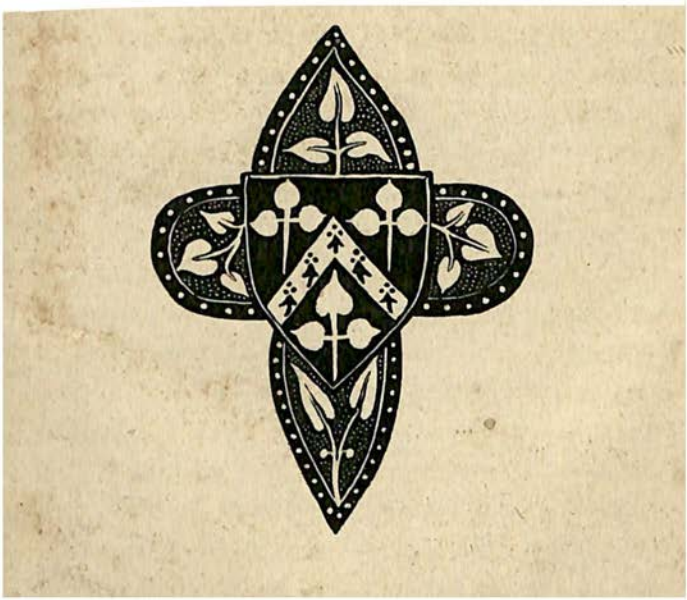
and nothing can be done artistically without the trouble of learning. Such things as eating, drinking, taking a chair or rising from one, and so on, fall under the head of trivial actions which in theatricals become important, because if they are carelessly done, they will look awkward and spoil the effect of the scene.

It is a great matter for the actors to retain their presence of mind if anything goes wrong in the action of the piece, as well as if any one forgets or bungles his words. We have seen what one would naturally think an overwhelming misfortune pass off unperceived merely because the person who occasioned it did not lose his head. He was representing an infirm old man bewailing his misery to his daughter, and at one point he was accustomed to rock himself to and fro in his chair. Now the chair placed on the stage at night was not the one that had been used at rehearsal, but was far less stable, and the result of this was that the actor rocked it and himself with it flat down on the floor. He had the presence of mind to lie still and the lady acting with him had the presence of mind to help him tenderly up, and not only the audience but many of the people behind the scenes thought that the fall was a new "effect" intentionally introduced. One of the actors, how-

ever, who caught sight of the supposed old man's face as he lay upon the ground laughed all through the rest of his part. Let it be noted that this accident would have been avoided if there had been a person told off especially to see that the right chairs, &c., were ready before the curtain rose.

In conclusion we may observe that it is impossible to give any cut-and-dried directions as to the science of acting. One set of golden rules for general guidance exists in Hamlet's address to the players, the directions in which seem easy enough to follow until one tries. One amusing instance of their practical difficulty occurred when a personator of Hamlet, delivering the words, "do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus," excited a spectator in the gallery to cry out, "Don't you either, old chap!" It is perhaps still more difficult to speak a speech "trippingly on the tongue," and not to "mouth it, as many of your players do," and yet deliver it distinctly and with just emphasis. Harder still perhaps is it to "suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature." Amateurs, who feel either too confident or too diffident, may do well to remember the saying that no professional

actor has ever learnt how to play *Romeo*, until he was too old for the part. To learn even the rudiments of a complex art is a troublesome task, but what is worth doing at all is worth doing well, with the repetition of which excellent rule we may take our leave of our young readers, who may wish to gratify a natural fondness for private theatricals.



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